

An Evidence-based Culture for Documentary Heritage Collections

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Executive Summary

Context

This report considers how those responsible for documentary heritage¹ collections held in archives and libraries in the UK can build a more sustainable future in the face of economic, social and technological changes. The expansion of digital access to such collections, by an ever more diverse community of users, blurs the boundaries between collections and user interfaces, calling into question the whole notion of 'a collection' as an intrinsically valuable physical asset.

Economic factors include the ongoing reductions in central, higher education and, significantly, local authority spending, which for many local councils will entail the loss of more than 60 per cent of income by 2020.² Further retrenchment of already pinched resources is inevitable; funding will be focused on the delivery of essential front-line services that can be shown to have value and be valued by the public.

Recently published statistics suggest further impact on the documentary heritage sector. The Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) *Taking Part* survey reports a decline of 3 per cent over the last two years of on-site visitors to archives, largely 65-74 year olds³. A similar downward trend in accessing archive or record office websites is also reported, while library access is static. This downward trend is expected to continue as more content is available online and available through a greater number of portals.⁴ Academic services and privately held collections have also witnessed a decline in staffing and 'efficiencies', gained through mergers with other collection services.

Understanding the value of documentary heritage

To address these challenges The National Archives and Northumbria University's iSchool jointly supported a project to address three interrelated aims. The study was designed to:

- provide a narrative as a context for building resilience and therefore a more sustainable future in an increasing networked society;
- offer recommendations to advance the way in which evidence is gathered and used to demonstrate the value of documentary heritage collections; and
- highlight the professional culture and political relationships needed to develop an evidence-based culture for the sector.

The starting-point was to understand how different stakeholders and communities value documentary heritage and the services they offer, and how these valuations align with the contemporary debate in the UK about the value of culture and heritage experience. This long-standing debate has in recent decades informed policy programmes intended to demonstrate a return on public investment, support and shape key policy objectives, and make the case for funding. This approach continues today, as evidenced by the Culture White Paper, which makes explicit the social benefits of cultural participation in terms of health, education and community cohesion.⁵

Project methods and approach

The huge canon of published literature over the last 30 years was reviewed, with a focus on UK government-commissioned and think-tank reports, as well as academic papers. The views of experienced professionals were sought as a means of gaining insight through an array of disciplinary perspectives such as history, public policy, computing science and cultural diplomacy.

This report offers a synthesis of the key determinants of value for documentary heritage as presented in the published literature, recognising that most studies are focused on cultural and performing arts or museums, whose missions differ significantly from those of archives and libraries, and which provide distinctly different kinds of engagement.

Compelling evidence

There is no magic bullet or quick fix for the challenges of sustainability, although advocacy to funders, policymakers and the public based on compelling evidence is a key component of the response by the sector. Current evidence includes data on documentary heritage services, largely performance data as to the number of on-site and online visitors, numbers of records catalogued and customers served. This is rigorously captured and reported through central agencies such as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Public Sector Quality Research Group (PSQRG) as well as a number of professional bodies. While data of this kind can explain how well a service performs, it falls short of explaining the impact, or the difference the services make to people's lives. A shift in the type of data collected is required.

The documentary heritage sector is well placed to leverage the evidence it currently captures and mine new seams, such as stakeholder views and cross-disciplinary research outcomes. The *Impact Evaluation of Museums, Archives, and Libraries: Available Evidence Project* retrospectively evaluated the evidence needed to demonstrate social, economic and learning impact, and recommended 'encouraging professionals to be more aware of, and committed to, evidenced-based practice', yet little progress has been made in this area since its publication in 2002⁶.

Meanings and misconceptions

The language surrounding 'value' is complex and subject to considerable variation in meaning. To clarify how terms are used in this report, definitions are presented in an extended glossary drawing on the vocabulary of a wider cultural values lexicon.

Key findings

- ***Capturing benefits***

This study found many examples of the value of documentary heritage services both to primary users who use and experience collections first hand, and to a much wider group of secondary users who benefit from the services provided by archives and libraries. The contribution these services make to the UK economy and to wider society may be significant, but evidence for their benefits and the impact derived has yet to be fully evaluated.

- ***Communicating the value, benefits and impact***

The documentary heritage sector falls woefully short in communicating to critical stakeholders the value it adds socially, economically or academically and the impact of this longer term. If there is to be a chance of a sustainable future in the face of ongoing reductions in budgets and other technological change, the sector needs to get better at this.

- ***Measures and metrics***

While a single measure for demonstrating the value of documentary heritage collections would be desirable, this is unlikely to emerge, given that evaluation techniques are designed to address specific questions. It is widely agreed that metrics alone inadequately capture the value of culture, cultural experience and services; more nuanced measures are required. Evaluating what is achieved (both outcomes and outputs) is considered as important as the performance of services. Measuring outcomes and outputs is increasingly a requirement of funders, and is made explicit in the 2016 DCMS Culture White Paper.⁷

While all metrics and measures designed to evaluate cultural value are to a degree subjective, they can be effectively applied in some contexts. For example, measures to evaluate the number of books published, emerging documentary heritage collections, content licensing contracts, and social benefits to communities, for example, could usefully contribute to a broad evidence base if captured systematically.

- ***A compelling evidence base***

Data collection and evaluation is just one strand of a larger bundle of evidence very much needed by the sector. Discussions with Chief Executives of services and professional bodies, local authority experts and a government Minister, confirmed that defending documentary heritage services against other statutory obligations such as social services is difficult and will continue to be so. A 'backpack' full of stories, statistics, evaluations that can be used with authority and conviction, is required if advocacy is to be successful.

- ***Further research and evaluation***

The documentary heritage sector is notably absent from the substantial corpus of government-funded think-tank research and evaluation studies undertaken over the last 30 years in the UK, and it therefore has not been subject to the same rigorous evaluation as other cultural organisations. Its 'value' and the long-term benefits to the communities it serves, and the impact it delivers longer term, have yet to be fully explained. There is an opportunity to redress this imbalance by lobbying funders for further research in this domain.

Next steps: A strategic approach

Foster the right culture

The defence of the sector depends crucially on commonly agreed objectives, strong leadership, compelling evidence and a willingness to embrace change. This report makes clear these desiderata are a long way off, but if action is not taken, the sector can expect dwindling resources and a continued decline in users. The days of strictly held divisions between archives and libraries are over, given that archives, libraries and local history services are all facing the same pressure of reduced budgets and the shifting expectations of users for ever more digital provision. All the focus groups and discussions conducted in relation to this project confirm there is a genuine grassroots thirst for change and a need for a policy direction to demonstrate the impact of these valuable services.

There are already some clear ways forward. In recent years the National Archives has stepped-up its sector lead in England, and the recently published Government sponsored, *Archives Unlocked*,⁸ sets out an ambitious programme to build resilience for the sector and includes as a key objective demonstrating the impact of services through better data collection and evaluation. The TNA/RLUK annual conference and a determination to improve leadership in the university library sector are other examples of change. However, these fall short of an unambiguous single voice for the documentary heritage sector as a whole, which is required to engage with important work in this area within DCMS.

Recommendation: Establish a cross-sector task force

It is recommended as a first step that a cross-sector independent task force should be set up, to include national, local, professional, government and academic experts to co-create and co-deliver a strategic plan to develop an evidence-based culture for the documentary heritage sector, building on existing cross-sector activity, other evaluation studies taking place and the anticipated momentum ignited by this report.

The priority actions for the Task Force should include:

1. Upgrading skills and knowledge

Prioritise skilling up professionals in the documentary heritage sector to help them develop an evidence-based culture, including understanding the metrics, tools, and impact models available. They see the importance of using evidence to demonstrate the value of their services, but often feel too ill-equipped and time-strapped to mine the range of information necessary to make a case. This requires collaboration with professional bodies such as the Archives and Records Association, lead organisations such as The National Archives and Research Libraries UK, The National Records of Scotland, National Library of Wales, The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, as well as regional bodies, academic experts, grant-giving bodies and funders.

2. Capturing data and using tools

- Support development of cross-sector standards for data-capture for the documentary heritage sector, in collaboration with allied initiatives already underway, for example, AHRC's Cultural Values project, the Library Task Force and the DCMS Evidence Unit.
- Understand how users would evaluate different kinds of information and the services they need to build an evidence-based culture.
- Evaluate the usefulness of guidance and toolkits designed for evaluation and capturing impact.
- Pilot existing technologies already used by the museum sector designed to capture stakeholder experiences.
- Develop evidence-based resources through an online portal to share evaluations and disseminate research in this area.

3. Addressing Research Gaps

Identify the research and evaluation studies required to capture better the value added by documentary heritage services, and to track the impact of services to government, the public and researchers. The key findings of this project could usefully be taken forward as the basis of a national research strategy to define the evaluation research for documentary heritage collections that is needed.

Develop a shared research strategy and undertake advocacy on behalf of the sector to research funders to secure funds for the evaluation of the long-term impact of the documentary heritage sector.

References

1. Documentary heritage is defined in this document as: collections as a cultural product kept in archives and libraries, or user-generated content, all the written documents created at present as well as the past that can inform future heritages. See: Ashworth & Graham (2005), p.8. The term better reflects the blurring of collections across archive and library domains, as silos between these sectors are breaking down and they are often being merged within collecting institutions, accepting that the mission of archives and libraries differ. [Ashworth, G.J. & Graham, B. (2005). *Senses of place: senses of time (heritage, culture and identity)*. London: Routledge].
2. The decline in funding for local authorities is well-argued in Crewe (2016). [Crewe, T. \(2016\). *The strange decline of municipal England: assault on local government*](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n24/tom-crewe/the-strange-death-of-municipal-england). Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n24/tom-crewe/the-strange-death-of-municipal-england>.

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/510798/DCMS_The_Culture_White_Paper__3_.pdf
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